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Saber-Rattling Bothers the Brass Hats

President Carter's saber-rattling in the Middle East has sent a shudder through the Pentagon. The brass hats know better than anyone else what a disaster would result if the Soviets called Carter's bluff on protection of the Persian Gulf.

The stark truth is that our armed forces are simply not ready for combat, despite the billions that have been lavished on the defense establishment.

According to classified Pentagon reports, only one-third to one-half of our armed forces would be ready to fight at any given moment. Only 13 percent of some of our most sophisticated fighter planes are in a state of combat readiness.

"Many units could not sustain combat for more than a few days because of maintenance problems and munitions and spare parts shortages," one report warns.

Though the Pentagon has been studying the problem for several years, there has been little sign of improvement. The NATO exercises last fall showed that our troops were no more prepared for combat than they were three years earlier, sources told my associate Peter Grant.

The reason for our shocking state of unreadiness, insiders say, is the obsession of Pentagon planners and defense contractors with super-sophisticated technological gimmicks designed to improve the performance of our weaponry. The fancy frills on our aircraft, for example, make them far more susceptible to breakdown than the simpler planes in the Soviet air force.

"Soviet fighter design philosophy em-

phasizes simplicity, reliability and minimum cost," a secret Defense Intelligence Agency analysis says. As a result, "the Warsaw pact air forces are maintained at a high state of material readiness in peacetime."

What's worse is that high performance doesn't necessarily mean effectiveness in combat. As one congressional critic pointed out, the Pentagon spent hundreds of millions of dollars to develop a fighter plane that can fly 2½ times the speed of sound.

"But there are only a few times you would need to go that fast in a combat situation," he said. "You've used all your fuel to get there. There's nothing to do but go home."

A recent classified General Accounting Office internal analysis concludes that "physical size and numbers of opposing aircraft dominate the outcome of air battles, not the sophistication of airborne radars and missiles . . . The almost religious faith that technical performance and complexity can be equated to military usefulness is not based on any supportable evidence."

For example, simulated battles conducted by the Air Force demonstrated that our fanciest fighters, the F15s and F16s, frequently lost out in encounters with the relatively bare-bones F5s. The F5 pilots were able to neutralize the super-sophisticated planes' costly equipment with simple devices.

The expensive military toys are favored by Pentagon bureaucrats and defense contractors, who "totally dominate the [procurement] process," the GAO adds. The reason seems to be that "it is easier to define and measure" per-

formance than effectiveness, the report explains.

The result of our brass hats' fascination with gimmickry is that weapons sometimes take as long as 20 years to get from the drawing board to the front line. The paperwork is staggering.

"The contract and specifications for the Wright Brothers' airplane was a one-page work statement," the GAO analysis notes. "Just a contract proposal now is often 15,000 to 20,000 pages."

Late Show—House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass) enjoyed one of the more pleasant perks of his high office the other day when he got to meet Sophia Loren at the White House. The Italian actress was representing the National Alliance for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse.

O'Neill complimented Loren on her beauty, and the movie star found something polite to say about the ruffled, white-maned congressman. The speaker confessed that he wasn't used to running on his looks, and then admitted apologetically that he didn't go to the movies much. But if Loren was in "The Bridge on the River Kwai," he said, he had seen her.

Ready? . . . Too Late!—When the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Air Force's intelligence branch testify on Capitol Hill, each paints a different picture of the Soviet threat. Congressional sources say the Air Force is easily the most alarmist.

As one staff aide put it: "The CIA will say the Russians are about to come. DIA will say they're on their way. And Air Force intelligence will say they're already here."